BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

COMPLETED

An Assessment Of 1980 Census Results In 10 Urban Areas

Congressional representation and the distribution of billions of Federal dollars will be influenced by 1980 Decennial Census results.

GAO's review focused on detecting any improprieties in taking the census. Its tests of the major processes showed that

- --population counts on most mail returned questionnaires were accepted as received,
- --most population counts directly obtained by census employees appeared in line with counts reported by households,
- --programs for identifying persons missed were sometimes not effective,
- --local officials were generally satisfied with their new chance to review census counts; the effectiveness of local reviews in producing more accurate counts is uncertain because results were not documented, and
- --questionnaires were accurately tabulated.

The problems GAO found did not indicate any intentional overcounting. If anything, they could lead to undercounting in urban areas. GAO's findings do not necessarily represent the national situation. According to the Census Bureau, GAO was effective in analyzing its operations.

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

ASSESSMENT OF 1980 CENSUS RESULTS IN 10 URBAN AREAS

D I G E S T

GAO monitored 1980 census operations to detect any widespread, improper altering or recording of population counts. The review showed that:

--Population counts on most questionnaires returned in the mail were accepted as received with no evidence of improper adjustments.

--Most population counts directly obtained by census employees appeared in line with counts reported by similar households.

--Programs for identifying persons not counted were sometimes not effective because of poor management and a lack of public cooperation.

--Local officials were generally satisfied with their new opportunity to review census counts.

--The effectiveness of local reviews in producing more accurate counts is uncertain because results were not documented.

--Questionnaires were accurately tabulated.

The problems GAO found with the census did not indicate any intentional inflating of population counts. If anything, the problems detected could lead to undercounting in large metropolitan areas. GAO's scope of work precluded passing judgement on the magnitude of the potential undercount.

GAO's assessment focused on the main processes of census taking--data collection, processing and tabulation. It tested the census at 40 of 409 temporary district offices set up to count the population, the three processing centers that machine read

the questionnaires, and Census Bureau headquarters which tabulated the final results. The 40 offices were located in 10 urban areas. Although the assessment was far-reaching, its findings and conclusions are limited to the census results examined. (See pp. 5 and 48.)

74 PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS COUNTED THEMSELVES

The Census Bureau asked the Nation's households to count themselves. Most were sent questionnaires to return in the mail. Nationally, about 74 percent of the questionnaires sent out were returned. GAO reviewed 12,000 mail-returned questionnaires to see if population counts were recorded as returned by the respondents: For 97 percent of the questionnaires, they were. The sample was taken as the returns were opened and the population count compared to the count as it left the district office. (See p. 9.)

Of the questionnaires that were changed, GAO verified that 56 percent were revised because the respondents provided incomplete or inconsistent information. The other 44 percent could also have been changed for these reasons but to verify this would have required contact with the households--GAO did not have the resources to make such a check. (See p. 10.)

GAO also examined a sample of 4,000 mail returns assigned for followup. Followup provided another opportunity, if there was any intent, to improperly alter population counts. GAO reviewed the questionnaires requiring followup to see if population counts were changed. About 93 percent of the followup returns showed no changes to the population counts, about 5 percent were changed because of incomplete or inconsistent respondent data, and about 2 percent for unexplained reasons. (See p. 12.)

GAO found no instances of employees improperly altering population counts in either sample.

CENSUS EMPLOYEES
COUNT 26 PERCENT

About 26 percent of the housing units to which questionnaires were sent failed to respond.

For these, GAO wanted to know how accurate the population counts obtained by employees were.

Since employee counts came from the same area in which some households had also counted themselves, GAO compared the average household size reported by enumerators for a sample of 400 enumeration districts to that reported by households. Enumeration districts were the block group units used in the collection and tabulation of census results by the Census Bureau. GAO assumed that because an enumeration district was usually small (270 housing units) and therefore presumably generally homogeneous, the average household size reported by enumerators and households should be about the same. GAO used a generally accepted statistical test to determine if any significant difference existed.

There was no significant difference in 37 of 40 district offices reviewed and in 6 of 8 urban areas where more than one office was reviewed. In the others, enumerators reported average household sizes significantly less than the average size reported by households. The enumerators' counts may have been too low. Further testing would, however, be needed to explain the inconsistencies. (See p. 14.)

PROBLEM QUESTIONNAIRES
NOT ALWAYS RESOLVED

Some questionnaires were accepted with less than complete information about the respondents. Although the Census Bureau allowed

this under certain conditions, GAO found 1,600 of 81,000 questionnaires reviewed where the practice was used inappropriately to reduce workloads. (See p. 16.)

Also the Census Bureau frequently did not followup on information indicating that entire households might have been missed. Unresolved housing unit discrepancies were found in 244 of 400 enumeration districts reviewed. At stake were about 4,400 households which may not have been counted. Failure to resolve such discrepancies could lead to undercounts in some urban areas. (See p. 29.)

PROGRAMS FOR COUNTING HARD TO FIND PERSONS

Population counts for group quarters (hospitals, hotels, etc.), and other special places (bus depots, railway stations, etc.) were within the Census Bureau's quality control estimates. (See p. 21.)

Comparing names on census questionnaires to other listings of names, such as driver's license records, identified a few persons not previously counted at households. (See p. 28.)

Respondents frequently did not cooperate in answering questions designed to detect potentially missed persons. This was the case on 4,203 of 16,000 questionnaires GAO examined. As many as 210 households may have been miscounted because the Census Bureau did not follow up on the households which did not cooperate. (See p. 33.)

LOCAL OFFICIALS REVIEW HOUSING COUNTS

To reduce undercounting caused by missed housing, the Census Bureau under its Local Review Program invited 39,500 communities to review and comment on the preliminary housing counts for their areas. The Census

Bureau hoped to identify errors through these checks and ultimately count persons missed earlier. Only 12,392 communities responded to the Census Bureau's request; 5,829 said they had no problems with the housing counts and 6,563 believed their counts were inaccurate. The Census Bureau rejected almost two-thirds of the latter because they did not meet established documentation criteria. (See p. 35.)

GAO reviewed the results of the Local Review Program in 29 district offices. The offices' records for the program were usually incomplete, not in the form required, missing, or had been mixed in with records from other office operations. (See p. 36.)

Where records were available, they showed that for 267 communities, 148 responses were accepted for review, 24 responses rejected for not meeting documentation criteria, and 95 communities did not respond. (See p. 36.)

The 148 communities challenged the housing counts of 2,459 enumeration districts. Of these 1,934 were resolved, according to the Census Bureau. The other 525 were not resolved because (1) the district office had spent its funding for the program, (2) the community's response was received too late, or (3) community estimates were lower than preliminary counts. (See p. 37.)

The 148 communities also challenged group quarters counts for 230 enumeration districts of which 100 went unresolved for the same reasons as cited above. (See p. 41.)

GAO contacted a number of responding communities. The communities expressed a lot of interest in the program, a generally positive opinion of the way it was conducted, but some dissatisfaction. (See p. 43.)

TABULATING CENSUS RESULTS

Population counts for each enumeration district were manually tabulated by district offices. These counts were used for quality control to cross check the final counts obtained by machine reading the questionnaires. (See p. 45.)

GAO's sample of 400 enumeration districts, of which 281 were processed when GAO's field work was finished, showed population counts were accurately tabulated. (See p. 46.)

AGENCY COMMENTS

According to the Census Bureau this review was a key example of excellent cooperation between the two agencies. The Bureau acknowledged that GAO was effective in analyzing district office operations. The Bureau said it will probably incorporate techniques used by GAO into future censuses to monitor district office operations. The Bureau's comments can be found in appendix IV.

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